



what's up?

eating disorders

INFORMATION FOR ADULTS WHO CARE ABOUT TEENS

What's it all about?

Eating disorders are serious mental and physical health problems for teens. Concerns about body size and weight may begin as early as 8 years old, laying the groundwork for unhealthy eating habits with devastating consequences. Eating disorders are most common among adolescent women but the number of adolescent men affected with eating disorders is rising.

Two types of eating disorders are anorexia and bulimia. Anorexia involves an intense fear of gaining weight, even though the person is underweight. Bulimia involves repeated binge eating followed by vomiting, misuse of laxatives or other behaviors to prevent weight gain.

What are the details?

- About 40% of Washington state girls in grades 9 through 12 think they are overweight and about 60% are dieting.
- Among children nationwide ages 8–10, half of girls and a third of boys were unhappy with their size. Nearly 40% of 4th graders have been on an occasional “diet.”
- 5% to 10% of U.S. teen females past the age of puberty are affected by eating disorders.
- As many as 15% of young women in the U.S. have unhealthy attitudes and behaviors about food.
- An estimated 10% to 20% of people with eating disorders are male.
- Media messages can distort a teen's image of her own body so that she thinks the “perfect body” is thinner than she (and most women) could ever be. Most fashion models are thinner than 98% of American women.

Why does it matter?

Teens are vulnerable

- Teens are vulnerable to the pressures of society and media to be thin. Physical perfection is equated with success and happiness and dieting is seen as a means of reaching this perfection.
- The percentage of young people diagnosed with an eating disorder may seem low (5% to 10%), but the behaviors that lead to eating disorders are much more widespread.
- Concern about body size and shape begins early and may lead to premature or unnecessary dieting, and eating disorders.

Health consequences: Now and later

- Eating disorders have the highest death rate of any mental illness.
- Short-term health consequences may include: altered growth, abnormal brain structure, decreased bone strength, delayed sexual maturation, the absence of periods in girls, infertility, hair loss, tooth loss and decay, increased infections, low blood pressure, internal organ damage, and irregular heartbeat—which may lead to heart attacks.
- Long-term consequences (even after treatment) may include: short stature, weak bones, a decrease in brain cells, increased blood pressure and cholesterol, gall bladder disease, osteoporosis, diabetes, heart disease, and certain types of cancer in adults.
- Eating disorders are also related to other risk behaviors, such as failure to meet goals for education and income, substance abuse, delinquency, unprotected sexual activity, and suicide attempts.



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What can I do?

- Learn about eating disorders and share what you know with teens. Help avoid mistaken attitudes about food, body shape and eating disorders.
- Discourage the idea that a particular diet, weight or body size will lead to happiness.
- Challenge the belief that thinness is great, and body fat or weight gain is horrible.
- Talk positively about the kinds of foods teens should eat. Avoid categorizing foods as “good or safe” vs. “bad or dangerous.” We all need a variety of foods.
- Talk positively about body image. Avoid making judgments based on body weight or shape. Discard the idea that body weight reflects character or value.
- Provide teens clear messages that you value them, no matter what their size or shape.
- Be critical of the media’s messages about self-esteem and body image.
- If you think someone has an eating disorder, express your concerns in a forthright, caring manner. Gently but firmly encourage the person to seek trained professional help.
- Exercise for fun and fitness—not to burn up calories.
- Teens learn from the way you talk about yourself and your body. Talk about yourself with respect and appreciation.

Adapted from Michael Levine, PhD

What causes eating disorders?

Several factors have been identified but the exact causes are not known. All these factors can play a part:

- Low self-esteem, feelings of helplessness and a fear of becoming fat.
- Family history and environment that includes regular discussions about dieting and physical appearance, weight related teasing or involvement in a profession that emphasizes thinness.
- Body image—societal and media influences contribute to the idealization of thinness.
- Possible physical factors such as genetics.
- A history of sexual or physical abuse.

Tools to protect teens

Certain habits and skills will promote a healthy outlook on eating and physical fitness, and help adolescents manage the pressure to be unnaturally thin and the stresses of adolescence.

- Positive body image protects adolescents from the emphasis placed on physical attractiveness.
- Healthy eating habits and regulating eating through internal cues protects teens from associating shame or guilt with eating.
- Mental health issues addressed through support and counseling.
- Healthy involvement in sports and exercise protects teens by improving self-esteem and tangible experiences of competency and success.

**hot
links!**

Eating Disorders Awareness and Prevention, Inc.
(EDAP)
603 Stewart Street, Suite 803, Seattle, WA 98101
206-382-3587
www.edap.org

Anorexia Nervosa and Related Eating Disorders, Inc.
(ANRED)
P. O. Box 5102, Eugene, OR 97405
www.anred.com

Eating Disorders Information Sheet
U.S. Public Health Service's
Office on Women's Health, February 2000.
www.4woman.gov/owh/pub/eatingdis.htm

Washington State PTA—Is Your Child Dying
To Be Thin?
2003 65th Ave W., Tacoma, WA 98466-6215
253-565-2153

Washington State Youth Risk Behavior Survey 1999
Published August 2000 by the Washington State
Department of Health
www.doh.wa.gov/publicat/publications.htm

Eating Disorders During Adolescence:
Nutritional Problems and Interventions
University of Washington Maternal and Child Health
School of Public Health and Community Medicine
<http://faculty.washington.edu/jrees/adolescentnutrition.html>

Physical Activity and Sport in the Lives of Girls:
Physical and Mental Health Dimensions from an
Interdisciplinary Approach
President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports
1997. Minneapolis, MN: The Center for Research on
Girls and Women in Sports.

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